

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
April 8, 2018

It's Easter, Again

John 20:19-31

I'll begin today's sermon with a story that I used to end last Sunday's message. It's from a woman who was explaining the story of Jesus' resurrection to her children as the family drove to church on Easter Sunday. "This is the day we celebrate Jesus' coming back to life," she said. Right away, her three-year-old son piped up from the back seat, "Will He be in church today?"¹

Yes, Jesus was in church with us last Sunday. He's in church with us today. As we see in today's Scripture passage, Jesus just keeps showing up in the gathering of his followers. Of course not all the followers who were here last Sunday are here today. That's one of the reasons why, in some parts of the Christian faith, this first Sunday after Easter is called "Low Sunday." The expression highlights the contrast between the great and glorious celebration of Easter Day and the more toned down period that follows. There's usually not the same buzz in the church sanctuary. Attendance drops. Offerings decline some. There's a sense of leaving the empty tomb behind and returning to the more mundane, ordinary, and unspectacular patterns and struggles of the everyday, especially within the life of the church.

A blog at the Acton Institute has collected some interesting facts about Easter. For one thing, if patterns held, more Americans searched for "church" on Google during the week leading up to Easter than any other week in the year. Secondly, the major television networks, which also pay attention to these patterns, run more overtly Christian programming during the primetime slot on Easter Sunday. And thirdly, Easter spending will be huge. Americans spend more on candy for Easter than for Halloween. A couple of years ago, the average American celebrating Easter spent \$28.11 on candy.² I'm guessing that figure has probably increased.

But keep in mind that some of the best savings on candy happens after Easter. I confirmed that during a trip to the Bryans Road Food Lion earlier this week. Just around the corner, as soon as I walked in the door, were the discount shelves. All Easter candy and other Easter-related merchandise 50 percent off! I left the store with bananas, Triscuits, a bag of Reese's Easter Peanut Butter Eggs, and a bag of Hershey's Easter Kisses.

For those first followers of Jesus, there was no venturing out to the local stores during the days following Easter. This was no time to be seen in public. Instead, they were hunkered down in fear that what had happened to Jesus might happen to them as well. The doors were locked. The security cameras were on. Some of the disciples had even been through usher training on how to spot a potential threat. The goal was simply to hold on and hold out until the risk level dropped.

But the risen Lord has a mission to fulfill, and work for the disciples to do. In his resurrected body, Jesus doesn't need a key fob. He just comes and goes as he pleases, walls or no walls. On Easter evening, he appears among his followers and repeats a greeting that he had used countless times before. But now, it took on greater depth. "Peace be with you." Then he showed them the wounds that made possible their

wholeness, and the wholeness of the world. He gave them a commission to spread that peace, forgiveness, and wholeness, not by their own power but by the power of the Spirit that he breathed upon them.

Now you might think that would be enough to send them out the doors and into the streets with the good news of Easter. But there was still plenty of fear to overcome, and plenty of darkness to dispel, in that seemingly secure space where they were hiding out. Through the presence and work of Jesus, faith was starting to take shape. But there was still more believing that needed to happen. This transition from fear to faith is reflected in the experience of Thomas, whose encounter with Jesus is the focus of the second section of today's text.

Thomas is often viewed as the patron saint of doubters. "Doubting Thomas." He has never been able to shake that label. It's actually an injustice, because there's much more to Thomas than just this one moment of skepticism. For instance, earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus receives word that his friend Lazarus is sick in Bethany. When Jesus tells his disciples to join him in returning to that region, they protest. Are you crazy, Jesus? People already tried to stone you there. Why return to a place where they want to kill you? But Thomas speaks up. "Let us also go," he says, "that we may die with him" (11:16). As one writer has put it, "These are hardly the words of a chronic doubter."³

That's not to say that Thomas's faith is full and complete. He's a hardheaded realist who's not afraid to voice his skepticism, or to ask difficult questions when things are confusing or unclear to him. Recall that when Jesus was teaching his disciples about his imminent death, Thomas is the one who asked, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus replies, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him" (14:5-7). It's not as if Jesus, frustrated with his disciples' lack of understanding, says, "Jeez Thomas, will you just stop it with the questions!" No, Jesus is open and receptive to the questions, and responds to them in a way that aims to shed light and generate faith.

So when the risen Jesus appears to Thomas, he's not there to shut down the conversation, shame Thomas, and banish him from the fellowship. Jesus is there to make himself, especially his wounds, available to Thomas, in order to help him believe. True, Thomas should have been able to believe based on the disciples' proclamation of the resurrection, just as they should have been able to believe based on Mary's testimony to the resurrection. But hadn't Mary seen the Lord on Easter morning? And hadn't the other disciples gotten to see the Lord on Easter evening? In one respect, Thomas was only asking for a visible, tangible experience similar to what the others had received. And Jesus gives Thomas a palpable sign that leads Thomas to confess, "My Lord and my God!" (v. 28).

Thomas's experience, along with the experience of Mary and the other followers of Jesus, shows us that Jesus loves us and cares for us. And one of the ways he does that is by coming to us and revealing himself to us in order to help us believe. Now that doesn't mean we can just demand that he show up and give us a sign, or otherwise we won't believe. Remember that in today's text, Jesus isn't there because of the disciples' invitation or summons. He's there among them because of his grace. The grace of God that comes to us in Jesus in order to lead us to faith.

Jesus says to Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (v. 29). Time passed, and those who were eyewitnesses to Jesus and his resurrection appearances began to die off. But the good news didn't die. Others, of another generation, would come to faith, not by seeing but by

relying on second-hand testimony. Through the witness of the community of believers, the church, word spread about how the Word became flesh. The message about Jesus' life death, resurrection, ascension, and return was announced to future generations, including our own. We ourselves have the opportunity to be among those whom Jesus calls "blessed."

Today, the "blessed" have assembled again for worship. It's Sunday, the Lord's Day. It's our weekly anniversary of the resurrection. That doesn't mean we forget our Lord's suffering and death. The cross is always central to who Jesus is and who we are. But for us, this day of the week always commemorates how our Savior rose from the dead. So in one sense, today is Easter, again.

Not Easter with all the extra time or special preparation that went into last Sunday's services. One person tells about how, on Easter Sunday, the church's minister was trying to emphasize the celebration of Jesus' resurrection. He asked the children if they had noticed any changes in the music from previous weeks. "For the last few Sundays, the music has been slow and somber," he reminded them, "but today it's upbeat and joyful. Do you know why?" No one ventured an answer until the organist's three-year-old daughter said, "Because daddy's been practicing all week!"⁴ Easter Sunday calls forth some of our best energy and effort. Whether we're rehearsing the choral anthem, preparing the sermon, arranging the sanctuary flowers, or baking the breakfast casserole, we want to make our annual celebration of the resurrection memorable and impactful.

And yet, the thing, or actually the one, who makes Easter Sunday most impactful is the risen Lord himself, present in the gathering of his people. What's true in our text is true here today. It's a week later, and when his disciples are assembled, Jesus shows up among them. In our case, the Easter lilies will eventually wither. The discounted candy will be consumed. The paper bunnies will be removed from the bulletin board. The drape on the cross will be taken down (By the way, don't put me in charge of that, after last weekend's incident with the splinter in my hand.).

What matters most isn't the wounded pastor but the wounded Christ, who comes and stands among us again today. He has promised to be with us, especially through the word, at his table, in our praying, and in our encounter with the poor and needy. In these ways, the risen Jesus gives us himself. And as testimony to himself, Jesus has given us this congregation, on this day, in this place, with these Scriptures. According to today's portion of these Scriptures, Jesus did many other signs or miracles that aren't included in this Gospel, but what has been written down is there so that you can know who Jesus is, why he has come, and what that means for you.

Knowledge of Jesus and relationship with Jesus aren't limited to those disciples who were there in the room on that first Easter evening, or a week later. Centuries of weeks have passed, and here we are, gathered again, on Sunday. As I said, in one respect today is Easter, again. Jesus is here, again. And he's here to move us from unbelief to belief. He's here for you. He's here for you who need to come to faith for the first time. He's here for you who are already believing but need to continue in faith. Whether you're someone whose faith needs to begin, or whose faith has already begun but needs to be supported and strengthened, Jesus is here, for you, so that you "may believe that [he] is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may life in his name" (v. 31).

¹ Peggy Key. Today's Christian Woman. "Heart to Heart."

² Joe Carter, "5 Facts about Easter in America." Acton Institute blog (March 24, 2016).

³ Mark Buchanan, "The Benefit of the Doubt," *Christianity Today*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (April 3, 2000) 63.

⁴ Lyn Hill. Christian Reader, "Kids of the Kingdom."